

The Rocket that Rocked our World

By Dauna Coulter

Forty years ago a mammoth rocket and some pioneers of great vision helped humankind achieve a remarkable feat: walking on the moon. The event had a profound effect on those who witnessed it and created endless possibilities for those who came after.

Those of us old enough to have lived in Huntsville before NASA's Apollo 11 moon mission can still recall the ground shaking as the mighty Saturn V first-stage rocket boosters, secured in a colossal test stand at nearby Marshall Space Flight Center, rumbled and roared. As the Earth trembled, we clung to our swing sets, paused our bicycles, jumped off our pogo sticks, and just stood still -- mesmerized and amazed by what we knew was history in the making.

Soon after, the rest of the nation stood equally still -- mesmerized and amazed as Neil Armstrong took his legendary "small step" on a distant world. A feat made possible by the same rocket.

It was one of those "transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world." Although John Milton wasn't speaking of the moment humankind set foot on the moon, his words aptly describe the profound effect events of such magnitude have upon those who witness them.

July 20 marks the 40th anniversary of the famous footstep -- the result of a long and concerted effort by 400,000 NASA and contractor team members from across the country.

This incredible event inspired and uplifted the people who watched it unfold. Black-and-white televisions flashed patterns across darkened living rooms as viewers stared into the light at the almost surreal scene.

"I woke my two youngsters up to watch," said Ed Buckbee, formerly of Marshall Public Affairs and the first director of the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. "They were half asleep on the couch -- yawning, their eyelids drooping -- but my eyes were open wide! I could hardly believe what I saw. We actually pulled it off -- humankind walking on the moon! It was like something out of a science fiction novel."

Ken Fernandez, who has worked at Marshall for more than 40 years, was 23 when the first moonwalk took place:

“The night of the moonwalk, I was in the Lake Guntersville campgrounds with a group from my church. We were watching the event on a portable TV plugged into my car. It was fairly late in the evening, but over 100 people from surrounding campsites gathered around our TV. Up on the moon, Armstrong came down a ladder and then stood on the lander’s pad. When he stepped off onto the lunar surface, there was a spontaneous cheer that was probably heard across the lake. It was one of those moments that you never forget.”

James Daniels, who worked for NASA from 1956 to 1981, attended the Apollo 11 Saturn V launch and then headed up to Fort Walton Beach for a brief respite.

“I rented a room in a beachside apartment with a screened deck overlooking the Gulf. I put a little black-and-white TV out on the deck and watched most of the moon voyage coverage. I watched all during the late afternoon and early night of landing day. I was so relaxed by the Apollo landing time, which was late night at Fort Walton, that I dozed off in my chair in front the TV with the sounds of the ocean waves lapping the beach in the night. Fortunately, I awakened as Armstrong began his exit from the Lunar Module. I sat entranced by the ghostly glare of Armstrong's space suit while he backed down the ladder in the darkened shadows of the vehicle and dropped off the last rung.

“When he uttered, ‘That's one small step for a man, and a giant leap for mankind,’ I cried. My thoughts reeled at his words, which so well captured the event’s historic importance to us all.”

The Saturn V, the rocket that made it all possible, was designed at Marshall under the direction of Dr. Wernher von Braun. Bob Ward, *the Huntsville Times'* first full-time space and missile reporter from 1962 to 1966 and then Sunday editor, later wrote a book about the famous rocket scientist. And in 1969, he couldn’t resist stepping back into his reporter shoes to cover the big story.

“For old times' sake, I assigned myself to Cape Canaveral in July 1969 to help cover the Apollo 11 launch. At NASA's press site shortly after liftoff, I was sitting up in the press bleachers tapping out my story on an old typewriter when I suddenly spotted Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger leading an elderly gentleman whom I recognized through the crowd below. I hurried down from the bleachers and intercepted the pair. Amid the swirl of people moving about, I asked Stuhlinger if

he would introduce me to his companion, Dr. Hermann Oberth, first space mentor to a teen-aged Wernher von Braun in Germany.

“With Stuhlinger translating, I interviewed the 75-year-old space pioneer -- one of the founding fathers of rocketry and modern astronautics. Oberth found the Apollo 11 launch ‘even more exciting’ than he had dreamt as a boy. He said that NASA must press on and ‘undertake a manned Mars mission.’ It struck me as so very fitting that Professor Oberth should be present for this epochal mission to the moon.”

Fitting indeed. Twelve years before the launch, Oberth had written these words in his book *Man Into Space*:

"This is the goal: To make available for life every place where life is possible. To make inhabitable all worlds as yet uninhabitable and all life purposeful."

Forty years ago, a big rocket rocked our world by helping a human step forth onto another world.

“*Shall we follow...?*” (from T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, *Burnt Norton*)

Coulter, a Schafer Corp. employee, supports the Office of Strategic Analysis & Communications at NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center. She writes for Science@NASA (science.nasa.gov).